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Book Review: The Butterfly Fauna of Sri Lanka

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George Michael van der Poorten and Nancy E. van der Poorten 2016: The Butterfly Fauna of Sri Lanka. Lepodon Books, Colombo. ISBN: 978-1-77136-189-7. Price Rs 7500 within Sri Lanka, ca. €100 outside Sri Lanka[1]

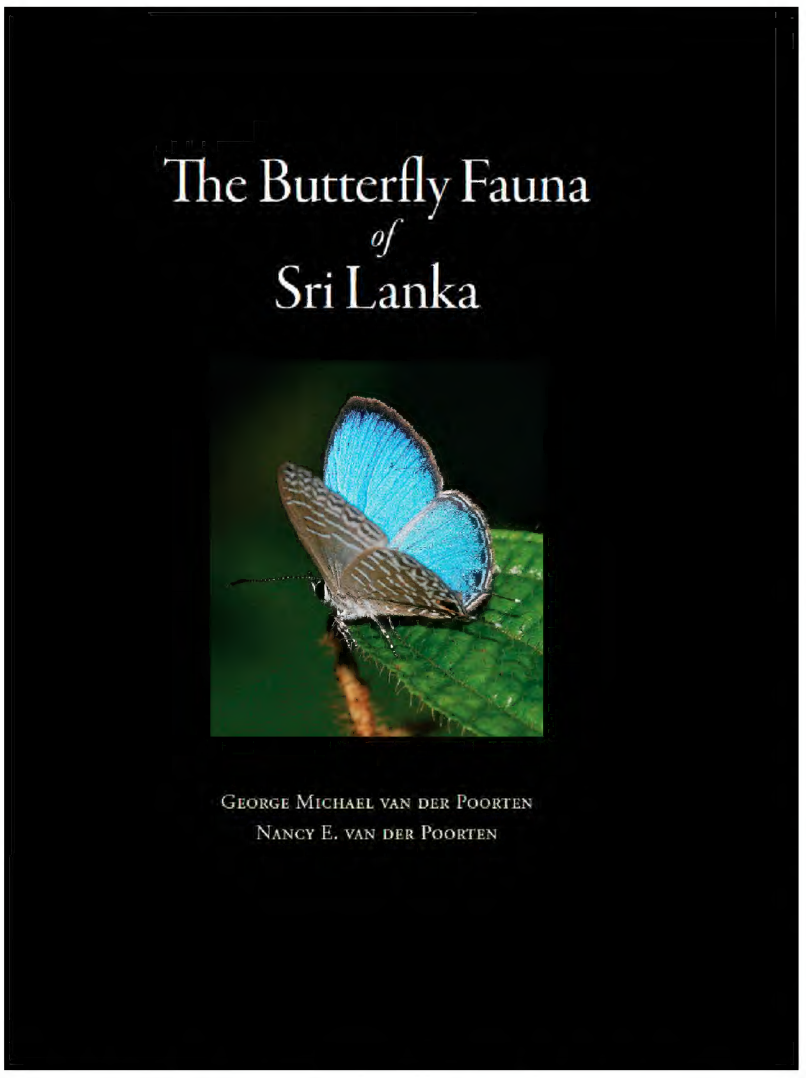


Figure 1. The cover of the book The Butterfly Fauna of Sri Lanka.

An absolute delight – this was the first impression as I first leafed through this book, and the feeling only became deeper as I read through. Sri Lanka desperately needed a comprehensive, updated reference to its butterflies, and the long wait for such a book appears to have been worth it. This book fulfills a glaring lacuna. For long, butterfly enthusiasts have had to rely on outdated, colonial era butterfly guides to identify or study Sri Lankan butterflies. Although Bernard D'Abrera's '*The Butterflies of Ceylon*', published at the turn of the Century, provides a photographic reference to all the then known butterflies of the country, it lacks a key, and has no natural history information. Other works that include identification keys tend to be rather dense for the typical butterfly watcher, and are not comprehensively illustrated. What was needed was a butterfly reference covering all species, and including informative photographs (or illustrations) which anyone can use to identify all the butterflies of the region. '*The Butterfly Fauna of Sri Lanka*' covers all these bases, and more.

The gorgeous photographs illustrate dorsal and ventral wing surfaces of males and females. If field photographs were unavailable, photographs of set specimens are included. Combined with the

1 Available from Lepodon Books: LepodonBooks@gmail.com

species descriptions and identification keys provided in the book, any serious butterfly watcher or researcher can now easily identify any Sri Lankan species. Close-ups are provided wherever needed. Rather than provide a taxonomic identification key to all butterflies, the authors provide keys to distinguish among similar looking butterflies, for e.g. the Hedge Blues (page 155), or comparative 'plates' with images of similar species along with distinguishing marks carefully highlighted, e.g. *Eurema* (page 315). In my opinion, these are more practical than a descriptive taxonomic key, especially for those who are not taxonomists or researchers. However, I would have liked to see a comprehensive taxonomic key to all species presented somewhere.

The comparative plates of immature stages are very useful, but understandably photographs are not available for all species. Now that the book is published, I believe many more amateurs will start rearing butterflies and we will soon have illustrated guides to the immature stages of all Sri Lankan species. The addition of photographs of hostplants further increases the value of the book.

The book caters not only to amateurs, but will also be a very important reference for scientists, students and conservation planners. The authors appear to have done a very good job conforming to state-of-the-art in butterfly taxonomy, which is no mean feat. The decades of field experience of the authors, and their profound dedication to the butterflies of the country, clearly show through in all aspects of the book. The authors have also described a new butterfly species from Sri Lanka, the first after several decades. I cannot think of other people who would be more befitting to author such a seminal book.

There are many recent Asian butterfly books that are born not out of long term experience with butterflies, but instead depend largely on collation of information available in existing literature, much of it dating back to the early 1900s. The authors of this book not only have synthesized taxonomic and natural history information from previous work, but also rely heavily on their immense experience, both in the field and during rearing butterflies. The result is a book which includes an impressively detailed account of the natural history of almost all the butterflies of the country. Additionally, the authors offer some information on issues related to the conservation of particular species.

If a regional butterfly guide does not make butterfly enthusiasts far and wide yearn to visit the region, then either the region's butterflies are not very exciting or the guide is not of great quality. Sri Lanka's butterflies are indeed very diverse and intriguing, and exceptionally important from a biogeographic perspective. Having used butterfly guides from several regions across the world, I can confirm without reservations that '*The Butterfly Fauna of Sri Lanka*' is one of the best I have come across in terms of usefulness, comprehensiveness, aesthetics and attention to detail. I am fully confident that this book will turn hordes of Sri Lankans into butterfly watchers, and entice many others from around the world to visit Sri Lanka to experience its marvelous butterfly fauna. And there are bound to be many positive results. Awareness about conservation issues will surely increase. The current knowledge-base of the natural history of Sri Lankan butterflies (to which this book is by far the best introduction) will expand, and in turn will encourage many researchers to take up butterfly model systems for research.

The book does not come cheap, but the price is well justified. If you are a researcher or taxonomist interested in butterflies, I highly recommend that you get a copy. If you are interested in visiting Sri Lanka, and would like to know more about its butterflies, grab a copy (with the caveat that this is not a light book to carry around during travel!). Given that the Sri Lankan butterfly fauna is very similar to that of Southern India, this book should also form a welcome and useful addition to the bookshelves of scores of Indian naturalists. Indeed, after seeing this book, my longing for a similar book on Indian butterflies has become more desperate.